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The Politics of Religion in Revolutionary Nicaragua

By MICHAEL DODSON

ABSTRACT: The Popular Insurrection in Nicaragua is examined against the backdrop of the grass-roots mobilization and protest that built up between 1968 and 1978. Particular attention is given to the linkages between grass-roots religious change and political mobilization. It is argued that the democratization of religious experience in the decade following the 1968 meeting of the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín greatly facilitated the participation of the poor in the Nicaraguan Revolution, but that it also sowed the seeds of intrachurch conflict after the Triumph of the Revolution. Post-Triumph conflict between church and state and between the church hierarchy and the so-called popular church are then examined, with a view to showing that the major religious issue in revolutionary Nicaragua is not Marxism versus the church, but democratization in the church and in the political order.

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RELIGION and politics became dynamically intermingled in Central America during the past decade. Each sphere confronted revolutionary challenges the inner logic of which has brought them into conflict with each other on new bases. The result has been moments of intense conflict, as well as mutual support, between church and state. The maturing revolutionary challenge to existing regimes also reawakened the dormant interest of such external actors as the United States. The event that most compellingly triggered interest in Central America was the Popular Insurrection, which broke out in Nicaragua in late 1978 and finally led, in July 1979, to the overthrow of General Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship. The Insurrection brought to power a revolutionary government led by the Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSLN). Just months after the Triumph in Nicaragua, armed opposition groups seemed poised to overthrow the regime in El Salvador, too, and the entire region appeared ripe for revolution.¹

Whether viewed from the political or religious vantage point, this wave of revolutionary change surprised most observers, particularly those in government and churches outside Central America, who had been accustomed to paying scant attention to the area. Government leaders in the United States, for example, viewed Central America as of little strategic importance while religious leaders looked upon it as a mission field that lacked significant religious energy of its own. Neither group would have predicted that the revitalization of religious life that followed the 1968 meeting of the Conference of Latin

American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, would stimulate and facilitate political revolution. Today U.S. policymakers describe Central America as a region of vital strategic importance, and in 1983 Pope John Paul II saw it as important enough to world Catholicism to make an extended journey through the region, speaking in every country.² The interest of such external political and religious actors as these derives from the far-reaching changes in religion and politics that are afoot throughout Central America. Nowhere is such change more vivid than in Nicaragua, where a complex new pattern of church-state relations has evolved since the Triumph.

In the United States the coming to power of the FSLN was viewed with alarm by the Carter administration, which sought to prevent it by negotiating Somoza's resignation and preserving the National Guard. Failing in this aim, Carter tried to gain influence with the Sandinistas by offering economic aid.³ However, the Reagan administration came into office convinced that Nicaragua had been lost to the Communist bloc, arguing that the Sandinistas posed a serious threat to democracy in the hemisphere. This administration characterized Sandinismo as a "political

2. A forceful statement of the view of U.S. policymakers is Henry Kissinger et al., *Report of the Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984); and Andrés Opazo et al., *El papa en Centroamérica* (San José, Costa Rica: EDUCA, 1983), provides an illuminating account of the pope's visit to Central America.

3. The tortuous process of providing aid to the Sandinistas is described vividly in William M. LeoGrande, "The United States and the Nicaraguan Revolution," in *Nicaragua in Revolution*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (New York: Praeger, 1982), pp. 63-77.

1. Nicaraguans refer to the overthrow of the Somoza regime as the "Triumph"; therefore that term will be used throughout this article.

extremism" that depended on aggressive external support from Cuba and the Soviet Union, and it described Nicaragua as a "Cuban-style regime," building totalitarianism at home and fostering subversion among its neighbors. These attacks have made frequent use of religious issues, charging that the Sandinistas have "harassed, persecuted and defamed legitimate church leaders" and that they seek to turn the church into an arm of the government by creating a "popular church."⁴ In this way religion has been further politicized in Nicaragua by external actors. But the church was already an important force for political change during the Triumph due to initiatives of its own.

PATTERNS OF CHANGE SINCE THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Prior to the wave of serious political unrest that broke out in Central America in the late 1970s, politics had been the exclusive domain of a tiny minority. Under Somoza most people were simply outside the operation of the political system in Nicaragua. Political parties never developed a mass base, only making brief appeals to the masses immediately before elections, which were invariably fraudulent, and therefore cynicism pervaded the society. Dominated by the coercive power of the National Guard, and lacking political institutions responsive to themselves, the poor were mired in political apathy. Widespread illiteracy compounded the situation. In short, Nicaragua lacked the essential infrastructure of democratic politics.⁵

4. "Persecution of Christian Groups in Nicaragua," *White House Digest*, 29 Feb. 1984, pp. 1-2.

5. See the excellent discussion of this issue in

In September 1978, the country seemed to plunge into revolution without warning. The poor were mobilized rapidly as apathy gave way to intense participation, and the political landscape began to alter. What few outside observers realized was that the pathway leading many of the poor into the revolutionary movement had its origin in a religious awakening. Thousands of Christians, acting through grass-roots Christian organizations and communities, participated in all phases of the Popular Insurrection.⁶ Leaders of the FSLN have acknowledged this participation and its importance to the Insurrection's success. A brief review of post-Medellín religious change in Nicaragua, and the mechanisms by which it facilitated the political participation of the poor, is essential to understanding church involvement in the Nicaraguan Revolution and the conflict it has generated.

In 1965, the final year of the Second Vatican Council, the church throughout Central America was deeply traditional in outlook, weak in resources, closely identified with existing social inequality, and dependent on extant political systems, and it had little meaningful contact with the mass of ordinary people. After 1968 this profile changed, at first slowly, then at an accelerated rate as pastoral roles were redefined, new conceptions of faith were developed, and the church was established among the poor on new terms. The initiatives that led to these changes were adopted by CELAM in its historic 1968 meeting in Medellín. In specific, obligating lan-

John A. Booth, *Nicaragua: The End and the Beginning* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), esp. chap. 6.

6. Michael Dodson and T. S. Montgomery, "The Churches in the Nicaraguan Revolution," in *Nicaragua in Revolution*, ed. Walker, pp. 161-80.

guage, the bishops pledged to put the weight of the church on the side of the poor in their struggle for liberation. It is doubtful that many bishops understood at the time where these changes might lead, particularly in Central America, where they produced a new conception of the church itself by precipitating a momentous shift in theology and pastoral practice.

The key to the influence of the church in political change was the new pastoral method by which the preferential option for the poor was implemented. Given the severe shortage of clergy, particularly diocesan priests, it was necessary to shift responsibility for pastoral work to lower levels of the institution, to involve foreign priests, women religious, and the laity extensively and to give them a relatively free hand. Although Nicaragua was superficially a religious country, the institutional church in fact had little contact with the masses, except through popular festivals, due to its lack of resources and its traditional attitudes. The reorientation of pastoral work led to the formation of Christian base communities (CEBs), which incorporated the laity more actively into the church and acknowledged the laity's importance in the pastoral mission. Religious participation at the grass roots increased as a direct result, bringing new vitality to the church.

In political terms, peasants and the urban poor were traditionally prevented from organizing, or their organizations were controlled by the regime. Although religious in their aims, CEBs provided a politically relevant alternative by serving as vehicles through which poor people could organize and meet to discuss common problems. Being under the umbrella of the church, the CEBs were initially left alone. Within the CEBs,

local leaders could be trained as catechists and as Delegates of the Word—lay pastors serving rural areas where priests were seldom available. By the mid-1970s a loose infrastructure of religious communities had been established through which people themselves held Bible study, worshiped together, and carried out projects of self-help. Such activity encouraged a new ethos of shared responsibility and capacity for self-direction. The relative autonomy of the CEBs stimulated their spiritual vitality and contributed to their efficacy as actors in society. After the Triumph, however, their autonomy became a severe tension within the church.

Innovative methods of organization were complemented by new methods of worship. Perhaps the most decisive innovation was putting the Bible directly into the hands of peasants and working-class people. The Bible was translated into the vernacular and the Mass offered in Spanish, giving the poor direct access to them for the first time. Encouraged by Delegates and activist priests to interpret the gospel in the light of their own experiences, the Bible became for the poor a resource for critical reflection on faith and politics. During religious services the priest faced the people and invited them to express their views. In due course people whose opinions had never been taken into account came to believe that their views were important.⁷ Moreover, they made direct connections between the Bible and the problems faced in their daily lives. This was a crucial step toward the sense of personal efficacy that is essential to active political participation. What this reformulated faith may have lacked in theologi-

7. Daniel H. Levine, "Religion and Politics: Dimensions of Renewal," *Thought*, 59(233):117-35 (June 1984).

cal sophistication, it made up in the coherence it gave to a critical or prophetic attitude toward society, and the catalytic energy it gave to organization and action. In the disintegrating political atmosphere that overtook Nicaragua after the 1972 earthquake, this religious renewal generated radical demands for democratization.

The formation and growth of grass-roots Christian communities in Nicaragua mirrored and encouraged the emergence of the secular popular organizations that played a critical role in the Popular Insurrection and that have been so prominent in the Revolution. Delegates of the Word became political leaders in a setting that denied peasants a political role, while CEBs became models of popular participation that pointed toward the democratization of society. It was this democratizing impulse, rather than the adoption of a coherent Marxist ideology or a theology of liberation, that gave religion its revolutionary character. This point can be appreciated by recalling that, from the standpoint of popular participation, the traditional church and the bizarre form of Nicaraguan oligarchy known as Somocismo were also reflections of each other. Under Somocismo, the surface forms of democracy only thinly concealed a deliberate stifling of popular participation. The church, itself rigidly hierarchical and inegalitarian, acquiesced in this political reality, so that church and political system were at least tacitly supportive of each other.

The church had functioned in Nicaragua according to the idea that its mission of salvation transcended the class differences that so sharply marked the society, but its institutional roots were firmly fixed in the more privileged classes. This inconsistency was rationalized by adopting an official posture of

nonpartisanship with regard to political issues; the church was above politics. The emergence of popular religion after Medellín seriously challenged this view, not only ideologically but in the most practical terms. Those at the grass roots, who had been only superficially attended by the church in earlier generations, and whose Catholicism had been taken for granted, now had their own religious communities, were developing their own theology, and thought themselves entitled to contribute their share to the nation's religious and political agendas. In the two or three years preceding the Insurrection, the FSLN mobilized these grass-roots Christians into the uprising against Somoza, but it did not create their organizations any more than it created their demand for participation. On their own initiative they brought the church into opposition to the political order; from there they moved, albeit hesitantly and sometimes painfully, into the mainstream of revolutionary struggle.

INITIAL RESPONSES TO THE REVOLUTION

Nearly all Nicaraguans would agree that 19 July 1979 began a new era in the nation's history, but not all agree that Sandinista rule is fulfilling that promise. At the time of the Triumph the country's most immediate task was the reconstruction of a devastated land, both materially and morally. In the final two months of the Insurrection, Somoza's struggle to retain power had become indiscriminate. He authorized heavy bombing of key cities, and even churches became targets of attack.⁸ The Sandinistas came to power intent upon effecting

8. I personally visited churches that had been attacked in the cities of Managua, Masaya, Matagalpa, Jinotega, and Estelí.

a social revolution and asserting Nicaraguan sovereignty in foreign affairs. The political system they inherited was totally discredited and had effectively collapsed, leaving little functioning administrative apparatus and no viable political institutions. Thus, the task the FSLN set for the new Government of National Reconstruction was that of nation building. This task united the two aims of creating new political institutions responsive to the needs of the poor majority and pursuing a non-aligned foreign policy.⁹

As it set out on a revolutionary course in 1979, Nicaragua could be contrasted with Mexico in 1910 or Cuba in 1959. Unlike the two earlier revolutions of these countries, Nicaragua was distinguished by the large number of Christians who offered active support and accepted the leadership of the revolutionary movement. Their loyalty stemmed from earlier participation in change at the grass roots. At the same time, there were some people in the churches who approached the Revolution apprehensively. In the course of five years of struggle and change, these different levels of expectation and commitment regarding the Revolution have generated three types of conflict over the church's role in society.

By far the most publicized conflicts have been those between church and state, especially between certain members of the Catholic hierarchy and Sandinista leaders. This type of conflict represents only one level of church involvement in the Revolution, however, and not always the most important, either for the church's future or the Revolution's integrity. A second kind of

conflict lies within the church itself, involving deep discord between elements of the hierarchy and the base over matters of theology, ecclesiology, and pastoral strategies. This conflict may be of greater long-term importance to the church and the Revolution than the first. A third tension lies at the grass-roots level of the church, where Christians are trying to stay active in both the church and the Revolution, integrating these important aspects of their lives in an atmosphere that discourages that integration. The difficulty arises from the great demands made on them by the Revolution, which are exacerbated by the protracted war in which Nicaragua now finds itself, and is compounded by resistance on the part of some bishops to such an integration.

Both among clergy and laity, Nicaraguans who feared the Revolution frequently focused their criticism on the emergence of what they called a popular church as opposed to the true church. They believed the FSLN was exalting the former and trying to isolate the latter. These fears are genuine insofar as they have an objective basis in a polarization between different groups in the church. But the simple cause-and-effect explanation adduced—namely, that the atheistic, totalitarian ideology of the FSLN produces the polarization—is less apparent. A common response to the fear has been to reassert hierarchical control and to demand obedience to authority exercised in the traditional manner. In this way tradition has been pitted against innovation, hierarchy against base, elite control against the democratizing trends unleashed by Medellín and by the Insurrection. As if these internal stresses were not enough, external actors have taken a keen interest in the church's role in the Revolution and

9. For a description of the original Sandinista program, see George Black, *Triumph of the People* (London: Zed Press, 1981), pp. 121-22.

indeed have gone to considerable lengths to influence it.

In the setting of frenzied destruction that marked the final days of Somoza, the Nicaraguan bishops issued a pastoral letter upholding the right of an oppressed people to defend itself against tyranny. Even in those extreme circumstances the letter was a bold step for an episcopal conference and it was celebrated by Christians throughout the country as a sign of the bishops' solidarity with their struggle.

The letter did not, however, imply identification with the coming revolution, for the bishops were not pastorally identified with the physical struggle in the way that, for example, Archbishop Romero was in El Salvador; nor did they have links with the popular organizations or the FSLN. On the very day the Sandinistas entered Managua, Archbishop Obando y Bravo was in Venezuela taking part in negotiations aimed at creating a moderate transition government that would prevent them from assuming power. It was not surprising, therefore, that the bishops issued another text just two weeks after the Triumph that, while acknowledging that "a new era in our history has begun," also talked at length of "anxieties and fears" over the ideology and goals of the Sandinistas. Fully half the text was devoted to the future of religion in Nicaragua and warned the government against trying to "impose something foreign."¹⁰ While Christians at the base welcomed the Revolution and sought involvement in it, the hierarchy approached it skeptically and from a greater distance.

Even so, the first year of the Revolution was marked by a general mood of

euphoria. Most Nicaraguans who stayed in the country shared in the sense of liberation that accompanied the defeat of Somocismo. Presented with the fact of the Revolution, the Carter administration pledged economic aid, as did other countries. The immediate tasks of reconstruction absorbed the great energies that had been released by the Triumph. The initial governing junta included members of the middle class and private sector organizations that had joined the opposition to Somoza after the January 1978 assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, publisher of *La prensa*.¹¹ It was the honeymoon year of the Revolution; external opposition was low, and internal, multiclass cooperation was relatively high. A number of priests held important positions in the government.

During this period, on 17 November 1979, the bishops issued their remarkable pastoral letter, "Christian Commitment for a New Nicaragua." This letter, issued just four months after the Triumph, marked the apogee of church-state relations and internal church solidarity. In it the bishops acknowledged the authentic Christian and pastoral character of the CEBs and seemed to invite active dialogue between themselves and the base. They acknowledged the depth of Christian participation in the revolutionary process and recognized the FSLN as the new nation's political leadership. The letter even embraced "the dramatic conversion of our church" and "the dynamic fact of class struggle that should lead to a just transformation of structures."¹² But accepting such changes in the euphoria

11. Black, *Triumph*, pp. 107-18.

10. "Nicaraguan Bishops Speak to Catholics and All Nicaraguans," *LADOC*, 10(2):20-23 (Nov.-Dec. 1979).

12. Phillip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 235.

of the moment, before divisive ideological struggle had broken out and before external actors had begun to exert pressure on Nicaragua, proved much easier than accepting them in the actual carrying out of the Revolution.

This pastoral letter, too, expressed reservations about the future and referred to the concerns and fears the bishops thought many Nicaraguans held regarding the possible course of the Revolution. The bishops mentioned in the letter their worry that some groups that "contributed generously" to making the Revolution possible would be excluded from shaping the nation's future, although there was no specific mention of whom the bishops had in mind.¹³ The letter only hinted at an issue that later became a source of protracted conflict when it suggested that the base must be in communion with the hierarchy. Apparently even at this positive stage some bishops were skeptical about whether the revolution was in the interests of the church and were ill disposed toward active popular participation in its programs.

These misgivings may well have been reinforced by the speed with which the FSLN consolidated its position as the nation's leading political force. Within the first six months it organized a government, created an army that it controlled, and launched major programs of land reform and literacy training. Widespread support of these programs among the popular sectors was obvious, and their participation was mobilized through grass-roots organizations either controlled by, or loyal to, the FSLN.

Theological and pastoral support for the Revolution was organized quickly as

well. Only one month after the Triumph an ecumenical center, called the Antonio Valdivieso Center, was set up in Managua by Catholic clergy and Protestant pastors who were closely identified with the popular sectors and sympathetic to the Revolution. Their purpose was to promote dialogue between church and government and to encourage the participation of Christians in the Revolution. Through such measures as the sponsorship of conferences and workshops, the publication of a wide assortment of theological and pastoral materials, and the training of pastoral leaders for the local level, the Antonio Valdivieso Center rapidly acquired a high profile as a pro-revolutionary Christian entity.¹⁴ Its work was complemented by that of the Central American Historical Institute, based in the Jesuit university, and by the Center for Rural Education and Development, which had been set up by the Jesuits a decade earlier to train peasant leaders, providing skills for agriculture, community development, and worship.¹⁵ Seen in their entirety, these organizations linked together a pro-revolutionary intellectual leadership within the church and the mass-based Christian organizations, rendering mutual support and encouragement. They also gave these elements of the church strong contacts with Christians outside Nicaragua.

The hierarchy pursued a similar but divergent path. In January 1980, the bishops met with leaders of CELAM in San José, Costa Rica. At this meeting the latter offered "fraternal assistance" to the Nicaraguan church, pledging to distribute Bibles and CELAM publica-

13. "Hablan los obispos de Nicaragua," *Cuadernos de capitación* (Lima: CELADEC, 1979), no. 5, p. 21.

14. Interview with James Goff, Managua, 13 Apr. 1983.

15. Berryman, *Religious Roots*, pp. 71, 231.

tions, to help develop courses in catechesis, and to devise an overall pastoral plan for the country. Note was taken of the serious problem of illiteracy in Nicaragua and more than \$300,000 in support was offered. While some bishops seemed enthusiastic, Christians at the local level were upset by this initiative. The core of their disagreement marked a major fault line of conflict in the ensuing years. They pointed out that Christians such as themselves, who were closest to the reality of poor Nicaraguans, were not consulted about the church's pastoral needs. Nor had mention been made of the Literacy Crusade then being mobilized by the government and directed by a Nicaraguan Jesuit. Instead, both CELAM leaders and their own bishops approached the matter with a missionary mentality, a mentality that did not fit a revolutionary society wherein pastoral work could, and should, reflect the people's own historical experience.¹⁶

DEEPENING CONFLICTS OVER RELIGION

Latent conflict involving the church broke out openly toward the end of the first year. Two of the three non-Sandinista members of the five-person governing junta resigned in April 1980. In a matter of weeks the episcopal conference, without prior consultation, called upon priests serving in the government to resign. Rather than obeying, the priests sought dialogue, while grass-roots Christian groups closed ranks in their support and the Antonio Valdivieso Center publicly questioned the bishops' motives. In the short run the matter was left unresolved, with the priests remaining in

their positions and the hierarchy seeking support for their demands in Rome. At this same time the Literacy Campaign was under way with widespread church support. All of Nicaragua's 52 congregations of Catholic women religious took part, Catholic schools were used extensively, and thousands of Catholic students, known as *brigadistas*, served as teachers. Yet, in the atmosphere of rising tension within the church, no bishop participated in the campaign's closing ceremony in Managua, and subsequently some bishops criticized the campaign as Sandinista propaganda. Archbishop Obando pointedly refused to take part in a ceremony prepared by his own Youth Pastoral Team to welcome the *brigadistas*, reportedly because he was not scheduled to preside over it.¹⁷

Perceiving that rising criticism of the Revolution was being expressed through religion, the FSLN, on 7 October 1980, published the "Official Communiqué Concerning Religion," which applauded the vital role played by Christians in the Insurrection, praising both the hierarchy and the grass roots for their varied contributions. It guaranteed religious freedom and held that religion and politics were separate spheres. The communiqué seemed to aim at reassuring the church hierarchy that the Revolution would not undercut religion, but the bishops responded coldly to the initiative. They argued that both liberal and totalitarian governments deny the church a valid participation in society. Totalitarian regimes do so by rendering the church merely "an appendage of the state."¹⁸ In

17. "The Catholic Church in Nicaragua and the Revolution: A Chronology," *Envío*, 1 Dec. 1983, p. 86.

18. "Documento de la conferencia episcopal de Nicaragua," in *Nicaragua: La hora de los desafíos* (Lima: CEP, 1981), pp. 113-24.

16. José Revelas, "Lopez Trujillo envía conquistadores: El clero local firme en el gobierno," *Proceso*, 26 May 1980, pp. 2-3.

that context they again raised the issue of priests in the government, charging that they were merely being "instrumentalized" by the Sandinistas. To the bishops, the criteria of religious freedom and church-state coexistence outlined by the FSLN were an "open door" to "political abuse, above all by those who want to eliminate religion from human life."¹⁹

Clearly, at least some of the bishops had deep-seated fears of the Revolution, even at this early stage. They saw it as latently totalitarian and were convinced of its hostility to religion. This conviction took the form of a premise rather than a conclusion based on experience. No actions had been taken against the church—neither confiscations of church property, nor restrictions on religious freedom. Church schools continued to operate and indeed received a generous subsidy from the government. The minister of education was one of the most prominent lay Catholics in the country.²⁰ But an experiential and theological divide now separated Christians. Some bishops were prepared to resist attacks on the church that they were sure would come, even if it meant conflict with those in the church who supported the Revolution. The original fluidity of religion and politics gave way to increasing polarization.

During the year 1981 roving bands of ex-Somocista guardsmen began to attack isolated settlements in Nicaragua from

camps in Honduras. By the end of the year they were relatively well organized, the attacks had become more systematic, and Nicaragua was feeling the impact. Many of the attacks occurred in Miskito lands of Northern Zelaya, near the Honduran border. Counterrevolutionary bands headed by Miskito leader Steadman Fagoth disrupted the government's health campaign. A serious incident in late 1981 led to the decision to relocate a large number of Miskito Indians further south, both for their protection and so the Sandinista Army could secure the Rio Coco area. This was done in early 1982.

On 18 February, without having visited the area to see for themselves, the bishops issued a statement condemning the transfer of the Miskitos and charging that there had been grave violations of the Indians' rights. The charges did not originate with Bishop Schlefer, in whose diocese the Miskitos lived, but in the archdiocese of Managua. In their statement, the bishops referred to the *contras* as "political adversaries" of the FSLN and did not condemn their actions. This event precipitated a serious confrontation between church and state and also sharply increased tensions within the church. Christian groups that visited the new settlements disputed the bishops' accusations, while the government responded with a vigorous refutation and asked the Vatican to send a delegation to Nicaragua to mediate the problems of church-state relations.²¹

The next three years were marked by a series of conflicts that reflected the

19. Ibid.

20. At that time the minister of education was Carlos Tunnerman, who was confirmed as ambassador to the United States in July 1984. His successor was Father Fernando Cardenal, who was subsequently required to leave the Jesuit order to accept this post. From the beginning of the Revolution, education in Nicaragua has been overseen by Catholic individuals, albeit ones who support the Revolution.

21. Interview with Leana Nuñez of the National Directorate of the FSLN, in Managua, 18 Aug. 1984. The government had already sent delegations to the Vatican to discuss religious questions on three previous occasions, and others were sent after February 1982.

pattern of the Miskito controversy, two of them over particularly sensitive political issues. The first involved the military draft law, passed by the Council of State in September 1983. The second concerned the letter on reconciliation issued by the hierarchy at Easter, 1984.

By mid-1983 the *contra* war was making great material and human demands on Nicaragua. The FSLN determined that the rapid increase in the size of the *contra* forces required a larger military mobilization. Much of the fighting at the front was being carried by militia rather than regular army. Consequently, a bill on patriotic military service was introduced into the Council of State. On 29 August, while it was still being debated, the church hierarchy issued a letter entitled "General Considerations on Military Service," which was signed only by the secretary of the episcopal conference and was printed in *La prensa* on 1 September.

In a general section on military service, the pastoral letter alluded to the pattern of "all countries with totalitarian governments" wherein the army is used to impose an alien ideology. Such countries seek to establish the "absolute dictatorship of a political party." Arguing from this viewpoint, the letter cited a passage in the bill that said military service would "promote in our young people a sense of revolutionary ethics and discipline." This statement was interpreted to mean that "the army will become an obligatory center for political indoctrination in favor of the Sandinista Party." To forestall such manipulation, the hierarchy urged those who did not share the Sandinista ideology to refuse military service on grounds of "conscientious objection."²²

22. "Conferencia episcopal sugiere 'objeción de conciencia': Nadie puede ser obligado a tomar armas por un partido," *La prensa*, 1 Sept. 1983, p. 1.

A range of Christian groups in sympathy with the Revolution responded in *El nuevo diario* two weeks later. They argued that in the atmosphere of constant *contra* attacks and the escalation of threats from the United States, the hierarchy's message looked like a "call to desertion." They pointed out that the letter was not based on any biblical texts or church documents, and argued that it was the first time in contemporary church history that an episcopal conference had declared obligatory military service illegitimate. Asserting their support for the law, they asked, "What totalitarian state would tolerate . . . the hierarchy publicly proclaiming its illegitimacy and publicly calling on the people to desert it at a time of threat and danger?"²³ In fact, the hierarchy was not unified in taking this approach to the draft. One bishop was out of the country when the letter was published and two others subsequently made statements defending the draft.

The pastoral letter on reconciliation, like that on compulsory military service, addressed the most explosive issue in Nicaraguan politics, the *contra* war. The letter generated not a move toward reconciliation, but intense, divisive controversy. This can be attributed in part to its accusatory tone and content, and in part to what the letter did not say. Commencing at a general, abstract level, the letter urged that Nicaraguans be open to conversion, live according to Christian standards and values, and "end . . . participation in injustice and violence." It then proceeded to indict the government and its supporters in the church, attacking them for sponsoring "materialist and atheistic education,"

23. "Al pueblo de Nicaragua y al mundo," *El nuevo diario*, 13 Sept. 1983, p. 2.

and for exploiting the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs²⁴ to "incite hatred." Christians who support the Revolution were described as having "abandoned ecclesiastical unity and surrendered to tenets of a materialistic ideology." The roots of this situation were traced to "individual sin" and to "political ambition and abuse of power."²⁵

The path leading to reconciliation was seen to lie in self-criticism that revealed "our faults," faults that "affront the church." Since only the Sandinistas were criticized explicitly in the letter, it was their conversion to which attention was drawn. This was made explicit in the basis for dialogue laid out by the bishops. The letter characterized the war as a "civil war" and asserted that the Sandinistas were "dishonest to blame internal aggression and violence on foreign aggression." It then called for the incorporation of those "Nicaraguans who have taken up arms against the government" in any dialogue for peace. Indeed, the government was urged to "welcome them with an open heart." The only reference to foreign involvement in the war was as follows: "The great powers, which are involved in this problem for ideological or economic reasons, must leave the Nicaraguans free from coercion."²⁶

The letter on reconciliation bore a strong similarity to the homily delivered by Pope John Paul II in March 1983, during his visit to Nicaragua. In each case the posture and tone adopted by church leaders was peremptory and confrontational, contrasting sharply with

their professed aim. In each case church leaders addressed an audience of common people without coming to grips with their religious and political reality as they themselves experienced it. The pope accused Christians at the grass-roots level of seeking to live apart from the true church and demanded their obedience to the bishops. He made no mention of the war, of the poor who had given their lives in it, and ignored the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs who stood before him. The letter on reconciliation was even more aggressive, explicitly attacking both grass-roots Christians and the FSLN and offering an interpretation of the war that made no mention of the U.S. role or previous government offers of amnesty. It was an interpretation that only a small minority of Nicaraguans would accept.

The repercussions of episcopal hostility to the Revolution have been felt most keenly among Christians at the grass roots, particularly in Managua and among those in CEBs who are identified as supportive of the Revolution. After 1981, as conflict intensified and divergent attitudes toward the Revolution became more evident in the church, CEBs located in the archdiocese of Managua experienced demoralization and some loss of vitality. Their relative autonomy of the pre-Triumph period, and their loose identification with a growing popular movement, gave way to the competing demands of loyalty to the institutional church and their own desire to participate in the programs of the Revolution. The most active leaders of CEBs were in great demand for the skills they could bring to tasks of reconstruction. The advance of the war and the state of military mobilization added to the demands made upon them. Some of the clergy upon whom the CEBs

24. The name given to mothers whose sons and daughters have died in *contra* attacks. Such mothers now number in the thousands.

25. "Pastoral Letter on Reconciliation from the Nicaraguan Bishops," trans. U.S. Department of State, pp. 3, 6, 7 (22 Apr. 1984).

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-12.

depended for linkage to the institutional church were either moved to other parishes by Archbishop Obando or were so intent upon nurturing support for building the new nation that they gave insufficient attention to the traditional religious activities that were still important to CEB members.²⁷

CEBs in rural areas have been less directly affected. They retain more of their earlier autonomy and are loosely coordinated by the Center for Rural Education and Development, which, although it has been disavowed by the bishops, continues to be an active and vigorous organization. The most vital areas for rural CEBs are in Leon, Chinandega, and Estelí, in the north of the country.

To cope with the pressures from the church and the Revolution, CEBs have undertaken a serious, critical self-examination. In early 1983 they set up a school to train new lay leaders, offering instruction in theology, social science, and methods of organization. The curriculum is geared to cultivating religious identity within an active participation in a revolutionary society. It is informed by an orientation that sees Christianity and revolution as compatible, but avoids identifying the two. In the final analysis, this seems to be the point of greatest disagreement between the base and hierarchy, for some bishops seem convinced that religion and the Revolution are irretrievably incompatible.

CONCLUSION

Those accounts of church-state relations in the Nicaraguan Revolution that portray the Sandinistas as hostile to religion and bent upon its destruction

are tendentious and misleading. Nicaragua is not Poland and there is no official orthodoxy that religion is a vestige of the class society that must be rooted out to facilitate the liberation of the people. There have been intense strain and periodic outbursts of hostility between some Sandinista leaders and some members of the Catholic hierarchy. The fears of the hierarchy have been documented briefly in these pages. In their opposition to the Revolution, the bishops are sometimes portrayed as defenders of democratic freedoms. At the same time, priests in the government and Christians at the local level who support the Revolution are seen to represent an antidemocratic politicization of the church, and it is suggested that they are merely being manipulated by the FSLN.²⁸

This article has sought to show that such a view, whether it comes from the Nicaraguan bishops, from CELAM, from the Vatican, or from the White House, ignores the indigenous process of democratization that took place in both church and society before the Triumph. The view also ignores the catalytic effect that religious change had in the political arena. The real issue in Nicaragua is not Marxism versus religion, but democratization in church and polity. Ironically, such democratization may be jeopardized by the deepening *contra* war that is being waged against Nicaragua in the name of democracy.

Finally, the most important conflict over religion in Nicaragua today is going on within the church. The government and the bishops maintain a dialogue through official representatives. Bishop Vega, president of the episcopal confer-

27. Interview with Father Antonio Castro, Managua, 16 Apr. 1983.

28. See *White House Digest*, 29 Feb. 1984; see also Humberto Belli, *Christians under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: John Paul II Institute, 1983).

ence, attended the swearing-in ceremony for president-elect Daniel Ortega in January 1985. There is less dialogue between hierarchy and base. They face the future with different histories, different conceptions of the church, and different aspirations. The challenge of

the years to come is whether church unity must be purchased at the price of obedience and uniformity, or whether the post-Vatican church can continue to accept pluralism in its own midst and grant a measure of status and authority to the laity, including the poor.